

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS' ROUNDTABLE WITH
U.S. AIR FORCE COLONEL DONALD BACON

VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA) OR LIEUTENANT COMMANDER BROOK DEWALT, USN (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs):

MR. HOLT: Okay, Colonel, whenever you're ready. Thank you very much for joining us for the Bloggers' Roundtable here on this Saturday morning. And so the floor is yours, sir.

COL. BACON: Okay, thank you. What we want to do is give you all an advanced briefing here, advanced documents prior to us releasing this tomorrow. I'll give you a quick summary and then take some Q&As.

On 3 November, coalition forces were protecting operations near Balad, in fact 15 kilometers south of Balad, nothing un-standard. But during these operations, they found an area where al Qaeda had been operating a home or a facility that they were operating out of, and they

found a diary. The diary is a 16-page diary, and it was written by someone who called himself Abu-Tariq. He called himself an emir for two sectors. And you'll see this if you pull up your translation version of the briefing. That's how he starts out.

In fact, this is sort of a blend of a diary plus a blend of a will. It has like daily entries, but I think it's also intended in case something happens to him he can annotate folks who were enemies, folks who were allies, folks who owe him money or who stole money or whether there's still accounts to be settled. And I think that's the intent of this document when he wrote it.

But you just hear it up front. He says, "I am Abu-Tariq, emir of Al-Layin and Mashahdah sector." And those are sectors just south of Balad where this diary was found. So the diary was found in the area of where these sectors are at.

I'd like to footstep two main themes that we should get from this document. First of all, you will see that the al Qaeda organization in this area has been hurt badly over the course of the year. But what I want to stress, that we don't want to extrapolate this to all of al Qaeda. This is just talking about this organization 15 kilometers south of Balad. And we don't want to assume or overpromise here and say, oh, all al Qaeda's this way. But what we really want to say, this is sort of a soda-straw look of this organization just south of Balad.

But you'll see that he's pretty candid. They started out strong in the beginning of the year or when he took over. And towards the end of October when this thing was written, of 2007, this organization is hurting. And we'll give you some facts and details out of this, you know, later on.

The second thing I'd like to footstep is that what we used to call concerned local citizens or the Sons of Iraq, he calls them deserters, traitors, traitor tribes. He calls them a sahwah or the Awakening. He has different names in here. You'll see that he is obsessed with that organization and the impact that it's had on the al Qaeda organization in his area. He attributes the decline of his organization to these citizen volunteer groups, or patriots I call them.

So those are the two things I wanted to footstep. Their organization was in bad decline. However, we do not want to extrapolate that to the rest of al Qaeda, and we want to just say this is a soda-straw look at this organization. And two, the concerned local citizens were a big reason for this decline.

In addition, one of the key things that I'd like to highlight, e notes out right in the beginning, he says, you know -- this is the organization he commanded -- he said, "There were almost 600 fighters in our sector before the tribes changed course," referring to the Awakening or the concerned local citizens. And at the end of that paragraph, he says, "The number of fighters in this organization dropped to 20 or less." So from just about 600 to 20 or less.

If you look at the page two, he talks a lot about financial things. Some folks owe him money, didn't treat him right. So I think this is just part of hey, if something happens to me, we have some accounts to settle here. It also talks about weapons on the page three.

What I'd really like to focus on a little more is the area where it talks about his five battalions. If you look at the part of the document that talks about page nine through 13 in the source document, it's the bottom of the second page in the translation version, you'll see that he talks about the battalion of Laylat al-Qadr Martyrs. He talks about its decline. It started out at 200, and now it has declined to only 10.

Going to the second battalion there, it also talks about its decline. It talks about 300 fighters, and now it's dropped down to 16 and then to two. And of those two, one was arrested and the second one was injured. So -- (inaudible) -- in that battalion at all.

The third battalion, it talks a little more there. There were 60 in that one. It doesn't talk about what the Awakening had done to that one, but it does say its activities are frozen due to their present conditions plus their family's conditions. So it sounds like it's not functioning well.

The fourth battalion, it also talks -- in fact, it's an interesting lead-off quote. He goes, most of its members in this battalion are scoundrels, sectarians, non-believers. So that's how he frames the people in that battalion.

And then fifth battalion, it also talks about traitors as well, you know, in that organization.

And just a quick summary, what you see is a decline of this al Qaeda organization. If you read through it, it's fairly self-descriptive. I think you'd find some interesting tidbits in it. What we did is we gave you the whole translation minus the actual names, because we thought we should protect, just as a precaution, you know, any family name. Like I say, that's a precaution.

So with that, I will turn to your questions. I would add that what you see here with the concerned local citizens or the Sons of Iraq, the importance that they're playing, just to give you an update, the total numbers of them stand right now at approximately 77,500. There are 135 different initiatives. And that's where we're at. We're seeing more and more of these currently getting hired into the ISF, and that's one of the things we were looking for as a measure of success.

With that, I'll take your questions.

MR. HOLT: Okay, thank you very much.

And Austin Bay, you were first on the line, so why don't you get us started, sir?

Q Okay. Well, Colonel Bacon, thanks for doing this this morning here in Texas. Of course, I know it's later in the day there in Iraq.

You're downplaying the document's significance and treating it as a local indicator. Obviously, you want to avoid sensationalism out of it. But these are important to get this kind of information out. Because we always get a read on what our morale is like, just pick up a daily newspaper. And here's an opportunity to see something of what al Qaeda in Mesopotamia's situation is. So how does this play? And I know you want to treat it locally, but I want you to

expand it regionally and then talk about it globally for a minute if you don't mind. How does this play in Iraq politically? And will this play in Pakistan?

COL. BACON: Well, I have a hard time speaking about Pakistan. I think it's surely --

Q Well, you know why I asked that. Come on. You've got a window here in one of these true believers who has watched it winnow, watched it wither. That's why. I'm sorry. I'll shut up now. I'm curious, though.

COL. BACON: Well, this is surely a good indicator of some areas in Iraq. We can see that there's a degraded al Qaeda in Anbar province. And we have some other indicators of that.

Hold on one second. I've got to pass on my cell phone to someone. Can you guys answer my cell phone? Can you answer that? Can you answer it? Thank you.

We've also captured documents of al Qaeda in Anbar. And you can see some similar issues going on there. Of course, we know that. We know that there's a 90 percent decline of violence there that's going on with al Qaeda. So it gets to my point being this is a good indicator of some areas of al Qaeda, but we didn't want to extrapolate it as al Qaeda in whole in Iraq, because surely they're stronger up in Mosul, they're still fighting in Diyala. So we see areas where they're still -- we still consider them the number-one threat or the top threat here in Iraq.

So we didn't want to overplay our hand here and say that this is indicative of all al Qaeda in Iraq. But it is clearly indicative of some pockets of al Qaeda here that clearly have been hurt by the surge, by the concerned local citizens. And we have to remember that the Iraqi security forces themselves had a much bigger surge than we had last year. We grew by 30,000 troops, they grew by 125,000 troops. And you look at the concerned local citizens, you know, right now we're at 70,000.

So al Qaeda in many areas has been hurt badly, but in other areas we still have a serious fight. So I didn't want to overplay my hand on that. But surely, we have the momentum. They're on their heels. They're still a threat. They still have the capacity and the will, though, to do damage. We saw that with those suicide bombings on 1 February, even though they (used an elderly handicapped ?) woman.

Now let me go back. You talk about Pakistan.

Q Well, I was using Pakistan as -- look, these guys are all around the globe. Maybe Pakistan was the worst case. I'll say Somalia. Heck, I'll say al Qaeda in London if you want me to, you know.

COL. BACON: Well, I just wanted to tie in, you know, Osama bin Laden and Zawahiri themselves in their latest speeches (and they're long ?) but they put an inordinate amount of time talking about the, quote, "traitor tribes," and they're referring to the concerned local citizens or the Sons of Iraq, the Awakening group. And so I'd like to say that this document here is further indication of the impact that the citizen volunteers have had. But we've seen that already in

indications with what Osama bin Laden's saying, Zawahiri, we've seen al-Masri, actually through his spokesman al-Baghdadi, they've all been focusing on the importance of these. And they've talked about it in various degrees. And we see it in al Qaeda in Iraq putting the focus on attacking these organizations.

And right now, we see that they're being attacked a lot more since October. There's been an increase in the attacks on the concerned local citizens or these citizen volunteers. Whereas the overall attack levels in Iraq have stayed the same or declined, but yet they've gone up in this area. So you can see where they're putting their emphasis. And it's not a surprise why when you look at this kind of document.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

And Christian.

Q Hi, Colonel Bacon. Christian Lowe with military.com.

One quick follow-up question and then a more broad question. The operation that netted this diary, was it like a targeted operation or was it a patrol or something by just regular U.S. troops, or was it coalition forces? Just so I can --

COL. BACON: The way it was characterized to me, it was a typical patrol-type operation. And that's how it was characterized to me. I was trying to get the right characterization on it. I will tell you, some of the other documents that we've captured lately like, you know, those videos that we made public this past week --

Q Right.

COL. BACON: -- that was a targeted operation. We were going after a particular cell. You may have heard about some documents in The Washington Post recently that came out of Anbar. That was a targeted operation. I had it explained to me that this was a more general, a more typical, normal days' op.

Q Okay. And a more broad question, you talk about the sort of strategic -- (inaudible) -- of this document, but what about the tactical significance? You know, it's been a couple of months since it was taken. So has it resulted in and can you give some examples of like targeted HVTs that have been rolled up and cells that have been rolled up and that sort of thing?

COL. BACON: There's a lot of information in there. I will tell you, you know, you're right. It takes a couple of months before these things get released because, first of all, you find them, you just can't read them instantaneously. I mean, it not only comes with a bunch of types of documents and people have to go through them, but then you've got to see what are the tactical relevance, and you've got to get that to the local unit. And by the time it gets translated, it's just a while to get these things circulated.

Q Sure.

COL. BACON: And by the time it comes across my desk and visible, you know, a little time has passed by. I can't speak for any specifics from this document, you know, what direct tactical intelligence was derived and how it was parlayed. But I will tell you that we have had some positive movement in the Baghdad belts. And if you look in the northern belts and the southern belts, the overall levels of violence -- Diyala aside, but that's a little beyond the belts; well, that's a little farther north. But just right up north of Baghdad, we're seeing a lot less levels of violence. And I think that you're seeing that also represented here in this kind of document, you know, the same thing, which is a little farther north in the belts, but it gives you a little bit of a look at some of the positive trends we're seeing here. You wouldn't initially see these kind of trends if you were looking at perhaps a Mosul al Qaeda cell, you know, for example.

Q Right. But you can't say whether or not this document led to any specific tactical successes?

COL. BACON: No, I can't. I will tell you that clearly our tactical intel guys at the brigade in that area, you know that they've gone through this and looked at it closely. Obviously, we redacted all the names, and I know our guys have all those names.

Q Yeah.

COL. BACON: I couldn't tell you if, you know, if one guy got arrested or detained or not. I did not do that kind of digging on it.

Q Okay, okay, thanks.

COL. BACON: I will tell you, though, there are a lot of names on this document. Our guys have it. So you can bet the brigade in that area and the battalions in there are familiar with every name on there.

Q All right. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Doug.

Q Yes, sir, Colonel Bacon, this is Doug Vee (ph) with the Civilian Irregular Information Defense Group. What is a C-5 rocket?

COL. BACON: You know, I do not know. We were looking at that, too. We do know that they have some homemade-type rockets. We have seen some indications of some of the more I would say early versions of the shoulder-fired SAMs. But we looked at that, and we weren't too sure what the C-5 rocket was as well.

Q Okay. Well, there's 2,000 -- (inaudible) -- floating around out there. That's kind of an issue I would say.

Next question. The --

COL. BACON: I will tell you -- if I may just interject, though. You will see that they do have a lot of weapons in this diary, and it shouldn't be a surprise. We pick up weapons caches every day, and it's amazing how many weapons we're getting off the street every day. So the fact that they have rockets, the heavy machine guns, et cetera is -- I was asked earlier, is this a surprise that they have these kinds of weapons? Unfortunately, it's not, because we are picking up these weapons all the time and getting them off the street and destroying them.

But sorry, go ahead, sir. I interrupted you.

Q Okay. The Lorries and pickups are a big issue to Abu-Tariq and who owes him money for what. This question is, is there a functioning Iraqi Department of Motor Vehicles, IP or an American soldier can get on the horn and call up and run the tag and find out who it belongs to?

COL. BACON: I believe there is. I've not personally worked at it, but they do have a central office that does the tagging. That's about the best I could tell you.

Q Okay.

COL. BACON: And we'd be able to work with them. So yeah, trust me, our guys, I know, perused this document closely, the folks who worked the intel side of it, and security.

Q Thank you, sir.

COL. BACON: Yes, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Bryan.

Q This is Bryan Hill of the Center for Security Policy.

I've got an IO question for you. I was wondering of all the successes documented in this diary, how much of that would you attribute to a new (messaging ?) strategy to break up the ranks of these people, and how much is due to kinetic operation?

COL. BACON: You know, the author here does not attribute a lot to kinetic operations. He seems to put a lot more attribution to the fact that just that these groups alone stood up, whether it was through just a change in the environment or whatever it was, it just sounds like a lot of his troops just melted away. So he surely doesn't talk a lot about the messaging or the kinetics. It was the fact that these organizations stood up, and a lot of them just switched sides.

Now, I will tell you, we got this Anbar document, and it does attribute some of the stuff to our information and media operations, which I found interesting, coming from the Anbar

document. I don't know if you had a chance to read about that in The Washington Post, but it came out a couple of days ago. So we do have some indications out there that at least al Qaeda thinks the rules have changed. In fact, in this document that we have from Anbar, the author there, who was also an emir in Anbar, claims that at one time we had the momentum, we were the dominant force, we had the stronger messaging and information strategy, and now the roles have reversed. And that's about an 80 percent paraphrase of what he said there.

So there is some indications of, you know, them taking a little bit of a beating in their public image, and they should be. I mean, they're using mentally handicapped people, they're using teenage suicide bombers, and they're decapitating people, and you find the torture houses. We just have to let people know what they're doing.

Q Sure. And I've got a technical question as far as IO is concerned, and then I'll let you get on to the next person. Have you found any of your operations hampered by the Smith-Mundt Act?

COL. BACON: By the what?

Q By the Smith-Mundt Act. Is that something that you recognize, that name?

COL. BACON: No, you know, I work in the Public Affairs side. But I guess I don't recognize the term that you're using.

Q Okay. It's a law, and we've talked to a couple of IO operators in Iraq who have had --

COL. BACON: Oh, I got ya. The smooth -- you said the smooth -- can you say that again?

Q It's the Smith-Mundt Act.

COL. BACON: It puts a barrier between IO --

Q Yes, it does.

COL. BACON: -- it puts the barrier between IO and PA.

Q There it is.

COL. BACON: I got ya. I've heard of that before, yeah. I'm sorry.

Q Yeah. Well, have you had any -- what it does, it's a 1948 law, and it only applies to the State Department. But a lot of offices misread the thing, and they try to kill DOD information operations because of it. Do you have any personal experience with that?

COL. BACON: I personally don't, and I would defer to our STRATCOM experts. I come from the EC-130 and RC-135 community, so I would defer to my parent organization here on that.

Q Sure.

COL. BACON: Oh, actually, we've got my colleague here. So he'd like to answer.

Q All right.

COL. BACON: I'll put him on.

MAJ. MORGAN: This is Major Morgan again. You know, I can answer the question to some degree. And yes, there's very different points of view on how the act that originally applied to the USIA applies to military information operations and the line between IO and PA. It's something that we look at a lot. But as far as outside interference, we don't get that. General Petraeus has a very liberal view of how those operations are conducted. The bottom line is that from Public Affairs' perspective, we don't cross any type of lines between deception and misinformation operations. So that's the best I can tell you. But I'd be happy to carry on the conversation via e-mail just, you know, just so we can set out a couple of things if you'd like to do that.

Q That would be great. Can I get you my e-mail address now, or you want it a little bit later?

MR. : Okay. I can hook some guys up off line?

COL. BACON: (Inaudible) -- thanks.

Q All right. That would be great. That would be great.

MAJ. MORGAN: Okay, thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Megan.

Q Hi. Yeah, was Abu-Tariq killed or captured? Do we know where he is?

COL. BACON: No. I did the research, and we're not sure. A lot of times they use alias names. If we have him, we don't have him under that name. So I have verified that we do not have an Abu-Tariq in detention or solid evidence that he's been killed. So the answer is I don't have any evidence of that case. But it is possible if we did have him he may be under an alias or something. We haven't put the two and two together. That's the best I could tell you.

Q Okay. And one last quick question. Which unit conducted this operation? Can you let us know?

COL. BACON: Yeah, it was in our MND-North, and I will verify it. I think it was our 101st Airborne, but I will verify.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Somebody else joined us late. Who's there?

Q This is Richard Lowry from op-for.com. I apologize for being late.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Richard, go ahead.

Q It looks from the document -- and maybe I'm covering old territory you covered earlier -- but it looks from the document that most of the people that left the insurgency moved over to the Awakening, other than being captured by any kinetic operations. So that's good news for the building of the Awakening in this area, isn't it?

COL. BACON: Yeah, I think so. That was one of the footstops right before you got on that this document really is a testament to the impact of the citizen volunteer groups.

MR. HOLT: All right. Anyone else?

COL. BACON: Yeah, I'll get back to Megan. I'd like to just -- maybe we could just say what's MND-North, the division up there. Would that be acceptable?

Q Yes, sir, thank you.

COL. BACON: Okay.

Q Could I get a clarification on that? Maybe I misheard it at first. I thought you said that it was a coalition unit, a Polish unit. Maybe I --

COL. BACON: No. I said coalition forces.

Q All right. It's coalition forces, and it may have been the 101st Airborne, but just say MND-North?

COL. BACON: Yeah. I'd prefer you say MND-North.

Q All right, fine. Thanks.

COL. BACON: You know, and I apologize. It's my bad Chicago accent.

(Laughter.)

Q No, it's a bad connection here in Texas.

Q I have a quick follow up, Jack.

MR. HOLT: Okay, go ahead.

Q Colonel Bacon, it's Christian Lowe again with military.com. You know, one of the things that strikes me when I look at this document is, why on earth would anyone at this, you know, time in the game really be writing out all of this detailed information and really risking totally undermining, you know, their organization by writing all these names down, the money, equipment levels, all that kind of stuff? Do you have --

COL. BACON: That's a very good question. And one thing I've learned in my nine months here is that al Qaeda takes very good records, for starters. I mean, just take it back to those Senjar records, and they record every single foreign terrorist that comes in, their names, the nationality, the route of travel, how much money they brought with them, so forth and so on. We see it at every little sector. They keep track of who they attack, times. We were able -- with the kidnapping video that, if you recall, that we knew that they had 26 previous kidnappings. That's because they take records so they can get paid for doing this stuff. So I think what you see is a culture here in al Qaeda where they do keep fairly good records of what they're doing. In this case, I think he was wanting, if something happened to him, if he got killed, he wanted to have a clear record of, okay, someone shafted me on this Lorry truck. Didn't pay me, right?

Q Right.

COL. BACON: They still owe al Qaeda.

Q Right.

COL. BACON: This other guy over here is a traitor. This guy over here was a friend. I think he just wanted to leave a record for the public record in this case, an al Qaeda public record, of who was a debtor and who was a creditor in his book.

Q Okay, thanks.

COL. BACON: You know, and I think I wish I would have been a little more precise with the gentleman who asked about C-5 rockets. As I think about that, I think those are more of the surface-to-surface rocket type, you know, smaller type rockets. I believe that's what those are.

Q Okay, thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Did we get back, because we were getting some problems -- (inaudible) -- there a little bit.

Q Jack, I heard it.

MR. HOLT: Okay, all right.

COL. BACON: May I just add in the difference between a rocket and missile? A missile is guided and a rocket is not.

Q Right.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q Good point.

COL. BACON: I agree. I know that. I probably just -- I wasn't clear enough. Thank you.

Q I was just trying to add clarity to the question on whether they were SAMs or not.

COL. BACON: No. I know when we looked at just a C-5, I wasn't sure what a C-5 rocket is. But as I read this closely, I think the best guess is it's more of, you know, something that you would fire from the ground to hit a ground target.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Q Okay. It was in -- (inaudible) -- with air defense systems. That got me concerned.

Q Well, they're also with RPG-9s. In the paragraph three, you can see that this guy has C-5 rockets and RPG-9s. I'll tell you what. I will do a little more digging and answer that question. And if I can, I'll get the answer back to Jack.

Q Okay.

MR. HOLT: And I will get it out as soon as we get it.

All right. Have we got anymore questions out there?

Q And also if you could get the specific unit that captured the document. MND-North has a lot of units up there. If there's any way you can do that and Jack can get it back to us, that would really help.

COL. BACON: Sure, will do.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

And somebody else on there? Who was --

Q Bart Buechner here with Navy Region Northwest.

Good morning, Colonel. Just wanted to get an assessment from you as to whether any of this information has been shared with coalition forces and whether you've had a reaction to that so far. I realize it hasn't been released publicly yet.

COL. BACON: We released it to the folks that are part of MNCI so it's, you know, some of the elements within MNCI as part of that coalition, yes.

Q What's been the reaction to that so far?

COL. BACON: You know, I am not sure. You know, I serve as a user at this point to get the information out. By and large, though, up in this part of the area in Balad, it's largely U.S. forces clearly, so it's MNCI centric, if you will, at this point. But tomorrow it will be more public.

Q Okay, thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Any other follow-up questions? We've got some more time here. Okay. Well, all right.

If there's nothing else here, then, Colonel Bacon, thank you very much for joining us, and we really appreciate this, good information. And we'll be watching. So thank you very much, and we'll be looking forward to the next time you can join us.

COL. BACON: You're welcome, and I hope all of you find that the documents are good to have in your possession.

Q Thank you very much.

Q It was very interesting.

Q Yeah, Jack, this was excellent. Thanks for organizing it.

MR. HOLT: You bet, sir.

Q Thanks.